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ABSTRACT

In 1995 the streamlined British national curriculum defined outdoor education as "outdoor and adventurous activities" (OAA) and placed it within the physical education (PE) curriculum. However, many PE teachers lack a knowledge of outdoor education and, when faced with limitations in time, resources, facilities, and expertise, may choose alternative options in the national curriculum. This paper shows how PE staff in secondary schools can deliver an OAA program in an urban environment. A program is outlined for a typical secondary school campus in Bedford (England). The activities described could be undertaken in the classroom, gym, "hard area," campus and playing fields, city parks and outlying commons, and the nearby river. With regard to staffing, the PE department must decide whether to use existing staff expertise, train staff to the standard required, or hire an external specialist to cover safety and organizational aspects. The great advantages of an urban-based OAA program are accessibility combined with low costs and the imaginative use of everyday settings and equipment. Constructing programs around such an environment develops lateral thinking and imagination in both students and staff. Seasonal limitations are less of a problem than in wilderness areas, thus allowing for educational progression, continuity of teaching, and cross-curricular links. (Contains 23 references.) (SV)

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Outdoor Education in an Urban Environment

by
Paul Beedie

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Paul Beedie

Outdoor Education in an Urban Environment.

Introduction : History and Context

Outdoor education in the National Curriculum has been identified as fitting within a number of subject areas, for example environmental education, personal and social education and physical education. It is suggested that each area has a case and that outdoor education, as '*..an approach to learning that crosses subject boundaries*', (Keighley, 1993:18) is flexible enough to locate in any one. Paradoxically, this adaptability has its weakness as the case for a specific educational niche becomes dissipated. As a consequence of the streamlined National Curriculum (NC) in 1995, outdoor education was conceived as Outdoor and Adventurous Activities (OAA) and placed firmly into the remit of Physical Education.

Whilst there is no doubt that the outdoors remains a powerful learning environment, (see Davies, 1992; Gordon, 1993; Humberstone, 1992; Keighley, 1993; Martin, 1993; Williams, 1994), by placing the onus on the physical education (PE) department the legislation has both limited the options for delivery of outdoor education (OE) and created an expectation that PE staff can and will deliver outdoor & adventurous activities (OAA). The subtle differences in the way the terminology is used has complicated the situation for many schools. Outdoor education is the generic term for a way of learning that is usually outside the classroom whereas outdoor & adventurous activities suggests a sub set of physical education , with its emphasis upon activity and adventure. Many teachers lack a knowledge of outdoor education. This is a problem because if teachers do not understand the educational rationale of OE there is little incentive to deliver an OE programme. The following discussion will develop three main themes which together will inform and facilitate the delivery of outdoor education in secondary schools. These are :

(1) The assumption that outdoor education can be delivered through an outdoor & adventurous activity programme via the PE Curriculum.

(2) A demonstration that PE Staff can deliver such a programme.

(3) A discussion suggesting that the urban environment is the most obvious and accessible arena for the delivery of such a programme.

The Problem : Limitations In Existing Delivery of OAA

The reasons for non-existent or poorly developed OE programmes in some secondary schools have been well documented, (see Baillie, 1996; Beedie, 1995; Gordon, 1993; Putnam, 1993). Apart from the general problems generated by legislation and health and safety constraints (see Watkins & Harrison 1997), there are more specific factors

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that inhibit delivery of OAA. These include limited perspectives from PE and other staff, the former through a lack of training perhaps and the latter because of a different set of educational priorities such as the need to generate good examination results. Time and resource limitations are fundamental pragmatic issues as are geographical location, access to a minibus, class size, financial circumstances, competition on the timetable, and links into the local community.

Towards a Solution 1 : Using The Urban Environment

There are many reasons why the imaginative use of the urban environment can begin to address the problems identified above, for example, its accessibility (Ruse, 1989). Most of us live in towns or cities and the use of this environment for educational purposes only requires a little lateral thinking and some careful planning. Keighley, (citing Mortlock 1984), suggests that OAA should aim to develop personal, social and environmental awareness via a programme that has a '*...balanced logical and challenging progression* ', (Keighley, 1993:19). The following discussion will examine a potential progression in OAA from Key Stage 2 (covering pupils aged 7-11 years) to Key Stage 4 (covering pupils aged 14-16 years) based on the opportunities that exist in and around Bedford.

Although the focus of ideas outlined below is the secondary curriculum, many good things happen in OAA from Key Stage 2, (see Connelly, 1993). One reason for this is the less rigidly constructed primary timetable and a second is the expectation that OAA will be delivered by non-specialists (unqualified in outdoor activity skills) utilising local areas such as playing fields, parks and woodlands (DFE 1995:5). There is no reason why this delivery should not logically progress into Key Stage 3 although Key Stage 4 does pose more specific problems (see Martin, 1993:10).

The focus for the example programme will be a typical secondary school campus in Bedford which has a gym/sportshall, hard area and playing fields. Bedford itself has the River Ouse running through the town, easily accessed via an open area known as the Embankment. There are two major urban parks which although of Victorian origin both have well constructed modern adventure playgrounds as well as groups of mature trees. The town is surrounded by farmland, but footpaths, bridleways and cycle paths abound. Priory Country Park, in the peri-urban fringe is centred around a lake which houses the sailing club. This extensive area of wetland, trees and open spaces has been fully mapped for orienteering and also contains an artificial white water kayaking site. This then, is the context for the outline that follows.

Towards a Solution 2 : A Progressive Urban Adventure Programme

1. <u>The Classroom.</u>
This is the natural place for reviewing (Greenaway, 1993) and is also where activities such as mapping and orientation exercises, jigsaws and miniaturised problem solving tasks can happen.

2. The Gym / Sportshall

Here it is possible to challenge individual adventure thresholds via progressive trust falls and bench games for example. But the themes of teamwork, co-operation and communication can also be explored via activities such as blindfolded walks, three legged football and human pyramids.

3. The Hard Area

This is best reserved for those activities which may involve bumping and scraping equipment as in the barrels and plank type activities such as 'juggernaut' and the planks and slings used for 'swamp walk'. This area is also good for compass bearing work, pacing, and orientation exercises (McNeill 1987 & 1992).

4. The Campus & Playing Fields

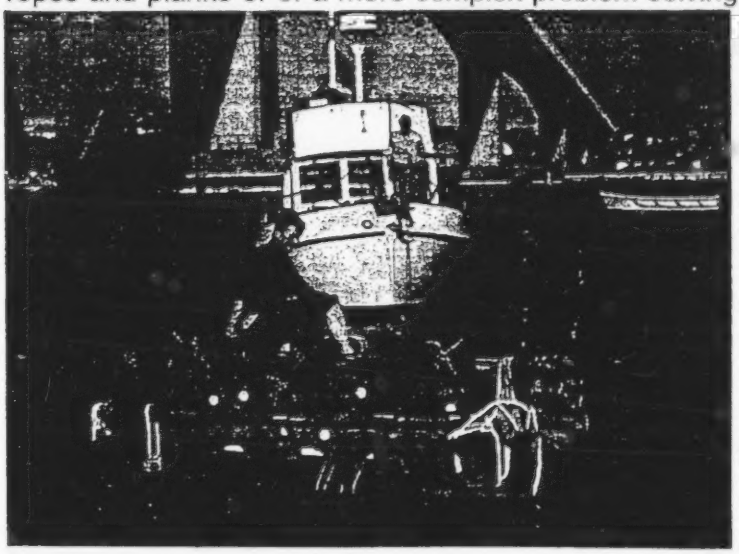
These are most commonly used for orienteering type activities. Maps can be drawn by staff and pupils. When the spatial limitations of this area eventually emerge then teachers can use more imaginative and challenging activities such as 'star runs', 'swing relay' and map memory formats.

5. Parks and Commons

Bedford parks have been mapped and offer huge potential for orienteering progression. There are also many mature trees which can act as anchors for low level ropes courses. Additionally, the parks have modern adventure playgrounds which offer specific challenges. Examples are : a 12 metre high rope pyramid and one perfect 'spiders web' location. The wetlands on the urban fringe offer great scope for 'earth sensitisation' activities.

6. The River

This runs through the town centre and offers a fascinating combination of water and adventure. Potential activities can be of a simple bridge or crossing nature using old ropes and planks or of a more complex problem solving format involving a series of related activities.



The river is also an environment in which pupils can progress into the more outdoor 'pursuit' formats of canoeing and kayaking. It is possible for pupils to undertake adventurous journeys along the Ouse, even incorporating an overnight bivvy on an island. In Priory Country park there is an artificial white water river site where skills can be further developed.

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Summary

The further the teacher moves away from the classroom the more likely he / she is to be progressing through the Key Stages 2-4 and the greater will become the emphasis on specific technical skills that are needed for the delivery of outdoor •pursuits• type options. There are many specialist facilities such as climbing walls and permanent orienteering courses which are found in urban areas and it is these that need to be more fully investigated as the OAA programme progresses to Key Stage 4.

Urban areas and specialist adventure activity provision

We now have the technology to create simulations of wilderness activity sites in our cities. Thus dockland sites, with only minor modifications from their former commercial function, can become sailing and canoeing centres such as in London and Bristol (Glyptis, 1992). As a result of more ambitious planning and building we can now go white water kayaking on artificial sites at Cardington (Bedford) , Holme Pierrepont (Nottingham) and Teeside, all on slow flowing lowland rivers. Additionally we can climb, indoors, on artificial climbing walls in all our major towns and cities (Last, 1996, Heywood, 1994). Examples of re-cycling site usage in this way are the canals in Birmingham as utilised by the Akkers Trust; the Foundry Climbing complex reclaimed from an old warehouse in Central Sheffield; and most ambitiously of all the '4.5 million project to convert Edinburgh's Ratho Quarry into a 'Scottish national centre for climbing' (Evans, 1996:20).

The choices that a PE department has to make about if and how they might be able to utilise such facilities to develop teaching initiatives in line with the requirements of the NC are not easy and, of course, there are many variables which will affect those choices, (see Martin, 1993:10). Broadly speaking the possibilities may be summarised as :

1. Utilise existing staff expertise to deliver skill specific modules which will be foundational for self contained adventurous journeys in the outdoors.

2. Train staff to the standard required to deliver the programme through the school INSET budget.

3. Pay an external specialist to cover the safety and organisational aspect of the activity area. In this case, it is important that the teacher works alongside the freelance expert to ensure that educational aims remain prominent. Without this presence outdoor pursuits can be misconstrued as little more than fun activities or even an adventure holiday.

None of these options offer easy choices and none come without some resource implications. However, whilst financial and other management decisions are made outside the direct control of the PE department, it will greatly enhance the case for a more comprehensive OAA programme at Key Stage 4 if a coherent and progressive

programme already exists at Key Stage 3. The following rationale for an urban based outdoor adventure programme should help in establishing this precedent.

A Rationale for Urban Adventure

There is an educational loss if pupils are locationally restricted to towns. Urban adventure programmes do contribute to reducing the pressure on our more fragile wilderness environment. However, it is wrong to use such a rationale to prevent the principle of open access to such sites as Collister (1984) suggests. The real rock climbing experience is qualitatively different from the artificial climbing wall not least because of its holistic engagement of climber and the natural elements. All pupils should have the potential opportunity for such an experience even if practicalities dictate that it is the urban setting which is primarily utilised. In reality, limitations of time, budget and other resources mitigate against such a participation for many schools. It is for this reason that the urban environment has an important educational role to play.

The great advantages of an urban based OAA programme are accessibility combined with low costs and the imaginative use of everyday settings (e.g. parks) and equipment (e.g. bottles, planks and crates). Constructing programmes around such an environment develops lateral thinking and imagination in both pupils and staff. Seasonal limitations are less of a problem than in wilderness areas. This in turn allows for educational progression and continuity of teaching so that cross curricular links become a real possibility particularly as the majority of the work on an OAA programme is happening in and around the school itself (Davies, 1992; Humberstone, 1992).

Conclusion

The location of outdoor education within the remit of the UK PE NC has occurred and seems set for the foreseeable future. This places the expectation of and responsibility for the delivery of OAA on the shoulders of PE teachers. PE staff are faced with problems inhibiting such a delivery and, because there are alternative options in the PE NC, outdoor education is commonly not taught to its full potential. These problems include limitations in timetable space, resources, facilities and expertise but most importantly many teachers consider that they lack the knowledge and understanding of what this area of work can contribute to the secondary curriculum. This is patently not the case.

The discussion above has aimed to redress this misconception by demonstrating that the delivery of an OAA programme that meets statutory requirements can be delivered by PE teachers who do not necessarily have a specific background in OE and that it can and is being delivered in an outdoor environment that is distinguishable from the wilderness setting of traditional outdoor pursuits by being both familiar and accessible.

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